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SUBJECT: DEMONSTRATIONS ANTICIPATED IN WAKE OF CARTOON THAT INSULTS PROPHET

¶1. (U) Summary: A cartoon satirizing the name of the Prophet Mohammed has led to the arrest of the cartoonist and a demand from Islamic clerics for the arrest of the editor and the publisher of the Bangladesh newspaper that published it. Some clerics threatened countrywide demonstrations after weekly prayers on Friday if the government fails to meet their demand. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Police September 18 arrested freelance cartoonist Arifur Rahman, who satirized the name of Mohammed by using the Prophet's name in conjunction with an animal, in this case a cat, in a cartoon published in a satirical magazine, a publication of Dhaka's largest circulation newspaper, Prothom Alo. A Dhaka court September 19 sent Rahman to jail for 30 days September 19, under a Special Powers Act (SPA) order, which is meant for preventive detention. Prothom Alo, for its part, published announcements apologizing for inadvertently publishing the "unacceptable" cartoon; withdrew the cartoon; vowed action against employees responsible for it, and promised not to publish any cartoons by Arifur Rahman in the future. The government confiscated issues of the magazine on newsstands.

¶3. (U) Some Islamic clerics demanded the government arrest Prothom Alo editor Matiur Rahman, its publisher Mahfuz Anam and others responsible for publishing the cartoon and cancel the paper's license. (NOTE: Mahfuz Anam is also the editor of the Daily Star, an English-language newspaper in Dhaka. END NOTE.) The clerics threatened countrywide demonstrations after Friday prayers September 21 if the government failed to meet their demands. In a September 18 meeting with Law and Information Adviser Mainul Hosein, another group of Islamic clerics recommended handing over the Prothom Alo editor and publisher to the "hands of law" and called for calm. Echoing the clerics' call for calm, Hosein referred to the cartoon as a conspiracy to destabilize Bangladesh weeks after violent protests at Dhaka University rocked the country.

¶4. (SBU) The Chief Advisor's Press Secretary Fahim Munaim told us that the Council of Advisors September 19 discussed the situation and the possibility of arresting the editor and publisher, but did not make a final decision. Editor Rahman himself, however, has told us that the Chief Advisor, who is in charge of the Home Affairs Ministry, has decided to file a case against him and the cartoonist, charging them with "hurting the religious feelings of the people." Other sources indicated that police and some intelligence agencies unsuccessfully tried to persuade the Chief Advisor to order Rahman's arrest. Editors of ten Dhaka newspapers in a statement issued after a meeting with Advisor Mainul Hosein September 20 called upon the public to forgive Prothom Alo in view of its apology and other actions; the editors asked the newspaper not to repeat the same mistake in the future.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Given the high sensitivity of any perceived disrespect shown to Prophet Mohammed in this predominantly Muslim

society, the government seems to have moved quickly to involve Islamic clerics in trying to defuse the situation, which had a huge potential to destabilize the country. The newspaper's apology and action against the cartoonist and others responsible for its publication, the arrest of the cartoonist, and the call for calm from the clerics and the government may help keep the situation under control.

¶6. (SBU) Comment, continued: The Charge convened an EAC meeting at the end of the day Thursday, September 20. RSO shared police reports that a demonstration of as many as 50,000 people is expected Friday in front of Dhaka's Baitul Mukarram Mosque, a popular rallying point. Police believe smaller demonstrations may occur at other landmarks, including at Prothom Alo's offices. In response to the threat of demonstrations, the Embassy has distributed Mission-wide a security notice that advises caution and notes areas of Dhaka that are off-limits to Mission personnel. The notice has been posted on the Embassy website. The Embassy will monitor any demonstrations on Friday and continues to follow issues of press freedom in Bangladesh. End Comment.

PASI